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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a university-developed teacher training program that was based on the idea that the regular neighborhood school should accept greater responsibility for teaching children with special educational needs. Various sections of the paper describe the background and philosophy of the program, which was developed from a model of teacher preparation presented in the Standards for Educators of Exceptional Children in Canada (SEECC) Report; discuss the preparation and competencies of teachers; and present details of research projects conducted in the initial stage, the planning stage, and during the implementation of the program. (FL)

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The Saskatoon Region Project: provision of educational services in rural and sparsely populated areas for children with special needs

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Transcript of an address delivered to a seminar at the Post-Graduate Medical Institute, Department of Pediatrics, Prague, Czechoslovakia

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Before describing the procedures which we followed and the results which we obtained in the Saskatoon Region Project, it is necessary to present some background concerning my own philosophy and some of the current educational trends in North America.

Background

(1) Philosophy

When I arrived at the University of Saskatchewan in 1968, I developed a new program for the training of Special Education teachers which was based on the philosophy that the regular neighbourhood school should accept greater responsibility for teaching children with special educational needs. Hence special teachers in regular schools should be "generalists". That is, they should have some of the diagnostic expertise, primarily in the cognitive field which has generally been associated with the educational psychologist, plus plenty of remedial skills, which educational psychologists have generally not possessed.

In 1970, a national report in Canada, the SEECC Report (Standards for Educators of Exceptional Children in Canada) presented a model for the preparation of teachers adequate to meet the needs of exceptional children* which was compatible with the program we were developing, and thus gave an impetus to it. Figure 1 shows the three stages of teacher preparation envisaged by the SEECC Report: Stage 1 is an elementary orientation for all teachers; the second stage corresponds to the "generalists" that we were developing and the third stage represents deeper specialization in more specific areas of exceptionality. Figure 2 illustrates, in a similar format to the SEECC model, the University of Saskatchewan program.

A further factor which facilitated the acceptance of the Saskatoon Region

*In North America, "exceptional children" refers to all children with special educational needs, whether handicapped or gifted.

project has been the trend toward "mainstreaming" in the United States, and the influence of American developments on Canadian thinking. In the United States, there have been at least three identifiable reasons for the trend towards mainstreaming, i.e. a trend toward educating children in as normal an environment as possible, rather than placing them in self-contained, segregated classes or schools. In the first place, some minority groups (e.g. Blacks, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans) have pointed out that, while children might have been segregated from their colleagues on the basis of low IQ, the effect in many larger cities has been de facto racial segregation, and Civil Rights groups have demanded that this process be reversed. A second element which has caused educators to re-think about segregating children with special educational needs has been the remarkable growth in the number of children designated as "learning disabled". These are children who have specific learning problems, especially in reading and communication skills, although their general mental ability seems to be fairly average. These children have tended to come from middle class homes, whose articulate parents often have considerable political influence. It has been estimated by some that as many as ten per cent of children are learning disabled and, therefore, if all these children were educated in separate schools, there would be an unacceptable fragmentation of educational facilities. A third, and perhaps more idealistic element, has been the influence on many American educators of the practices of normalization that have been taking place in Scandinavia which have had a very positive influence on many American educators.

At the University of Saskatchewan, we have a program of teacher preparation which is probably the closest approximation to that recommended on the SEECC Report and so were in a unique position to co-operate with some rural educational jurisdictions in developing special educational services which

emphasize the role of the neighbourhood school and which are compatible with our philosophy of teacher education.

(2) Preparation and competencies of teachers

Teachers who are trained to the second stage of the SEECC model are used as resource teachers in regular schools and are literally the centre of the system of special educational services. Their specialist training extends approximately one year beyond that of regular teacher training and their curriculum is, to a large extent, described in terms of competencies. That is, in drawing up the teacher training program, we estimated what the trainee teacher knows and can do at the beginning of the specialist course and we also decide what he or she has to know and has to be competent to do by the time they have completed the course. The difference between the desired end-product and initial competencies defines the course content. This course content is, to a large extent, operationally defined, i.e. class descriptions will state that graduates must be competent to administer, score and interpret specified tests, to interpret reports from other specialists, to carry out remedial strategies and specific methods appropriate to individual diagnoses, etc.

I am not intimately familiar with the course content in etopedia, somatopedia, tyflopedia, psychopedia or logopedia, which constitute the course content in Czechoslovakia, but I suspect that in North America we are more inclined to competency-based objectives, essentially in an educational and psychological context, in comparison with European practices that seem to pay more attention to neurology and physiological causes of educational handicap.

The first level of teacher preparation (i.e. the base of the SEECC triangle), which all teachers receive is a methodology class extending over about 40 hours

of contact time, in which teacher trainees are helped to become aware of characteristics which distinguish children with particular handicaps, to learn elementary diagnostic teaching techniques and how to modify their pedagogic practices and their educational expectancies in the light of particular handicaps. They are also familiarized with the SEECC model, with emphasis on professional co-operation with the resource teacher.

The resource teacher has a resource room, but we have emphasized the teacher rather than the room, in order to help ensure that "sending a child to the resource room" is not seen as a method whereby the class teacher can get rid of children who are difficult to teach. In fact, the resource teacher's duties spread over a wide spectrum from informal consultation to intensive and regular direct teaching of children (Figure 3).

The research project: initial phases

Administration of educational services in Saskatchewan are decentralized to the extent that many rural jurisdictions extend over a large area but have relatively few students. Thus, for example, three rural units outside the city of Saskatoon cover an area of approximately 20,000 square kilometers but have a school population (kindergarten through grade eight) of only about 4,000 students. Some of the schools are very small, but it has been policy over a number of years to transport children by bus to larger centers, so the size of an average school would be approximately 200 students. The professional personnel comprised three superintendents, approximately 25 principals and about 150 teachers. The three school jurisdictions were each dissatisfied with their special educational services, were seeking to provide some kind of joint service, and were receptive to the idea of a special education service based on the SEECC model.

Initially, there was considerable discussion and negotiation with the three superintendents, as a result of which they modified their teacher-hiring practices to make sure that new employees possessed appropriate competencies. They also encouraged their present teachers to upgrade their qualifications through attendance at the University's Summer School, and, where necessary, they began to stock up schools with materials appropriate for resource teachers.

A one-day orientation seminar/workshop was organized for the school principals, during which the SEECC model and the proposed project were described to them and they were encouraged to express any fears and opposition to the new practices that were being proposed. Finally, in the week before the academic year in which the project was to get underway, three days were devoted to briefing all teachers in the system about the project and the provision of special educational services being proposed. These three days also formed the first phase of an inservice program that continued throughout the academic year and which corresponded to Stage One of the SEECC teacher preparation model.

With hindsight, we realized that all teachers should have been made to feel that they had been consulted as professional colleagues in the developmental stages of the project. However, once the project became operational, regular communication was maintained with all persons who were involved through a newsletter entitled "The SEECC Chronicle".

While all this professional preparation and orientation was going on, negotiations were taking place with the Saskatchewan provincial government for their financial co-operation in establishing a Learning Assistance Centre, which corresponds to the third and most advanced stage of the SEECC teacher preparation model. The Learning Assistance Centre was envisaged as a centralized facility for more intensive diagnosis and short-term prescriptive teaching, for those

children who required more specialized help than the regular class teachers and the school resource teacher were able to provide.

Research studies during the planning stage of the project

In a school jurisdiction other than those engaged in the present project, teachers in elementary schools referred an average of three children per class for consultant help from outside the school and felt that approximately another four children who had not actually been referred needed additional attention. As part of the same study, class teachers were asked for their opinion as to the form of treatment which the children they had actually referred or had considered referring, should receive. Of the seven children per class, the teachers indicated that the overwhelming majority (average of 6.2 per class) could be taught in a regular class provided that, in some cases, the class teacher received adequate backup service. (Haverstock, 1977).

Another study carried out in a school unit that was not involved in the present project, demonstrated that although there is a comparable incidence of learning disabilities in schools serving districts of different socio-economic status, the probability of a learning disabled child coming to the attention of a centrally-based consultant is far greater if he is of above average socio-economic status. This suggests the need for teachers in all schools who are able to detect and diagnose learning disabilities. (Kealy, 1974).

A further research study showed that there is a wide variation in the degree to which teachers accept the presence of groups of exceptional children in regular schools. This variability emphasizes the importance of the influence of school climate on teacher acceptability of exceptional students. (Dickson, 1975).

Irrespective of the degree to which a school staff accepted the prospect

of exceptional children in regular schools, the category of exceptional child considered by regular school staffs to be the most difficult to integrate was the category of child which happened to be in their own particular school. Familiarity in itself, apparently, does not breed acceptance, in addition there is need for deliberate teacher education.

Research studies carried out during the implementation of the project

An attempt was made to determine what shift, if any, took place in the opinions of teachers, following Level 1 inservice, about the degree of segregation which is necessary for the education of exceptional children. Level 1 inservice training had been designed to increase teachers' knowledge of, and competence with, exceptional students with the expectancy that the increased competence would result in increased confidence. In turn, it was hoped that this increased confidence would result in greater acceptance by regular teachers of handicapped children in regular schools.

Teachers were therefore presented with a list of pen pictures of children with symptoms of a variety of educational handicaps, and were asked to suggest where, from regular classroom to residential special school, each child should be educated. This made it possible to get a quantified indication of the "distance from the regular classroom" which each teacher thought exceptional children should be taught. Assessments made before and after inservice showed a significant shift in the direction of more cohesive rather than fragmented education for the exceptional. Undergraduate student teachers showed the same shift after their pre-service Level 1 training.

A significant increase in teachers' feelings of success in working with educationally handicapped students was noted following Level 1 inservice.

Several inquiries were made to assess the effectiveness of the Learning Assistance Centre. A sample of 20 children who had been referred to the LAC showed overall significant gains in achievement, after an average of 40 full days' attendance per student, but the gain was not significantly greater than that shown by a control group. However, it must be remembered that the primary purpose of the LAC is to provide an extended diagnosis by a specialist team. And an integral part of this diagnosis is a prescribed program of remediation, to be carried out in the regular school by the resource and class teachers, who had themselves felt a need for additional professional help.

Direct benefits of LAC attendance were evident in improved self respect. Children who attended the LAC showed a significant gain in self-concept compared with similar children who did not attend the LAC. Those children whose original self-concept had been lowest showed the most dramatic gains.

The opinions of regular and resource teachers of the value of referrals to the Learning Assistance Centre were solicited by means of a questionnaire about children who had been referred, treated and returned full-time to their home school. Responses were essentially positive. The teachers noted the improved confidence of children who had been to the LAC as the most striking change, followed by improved academic school work and attitude to school and behavior. The frequency and value of contact with LAC personnel attracted favourable comment and reports received from the LAC were judged to be helpful.

Parents assessed the help their children had received at the LAC as positive, some extremely so. Virtually all parents who had not initially rated their children's behaviour and attitude to school as positive, reported improvement

in these areas. The in-depth treatment, as opposed to short-term diagnostic service, was particularly appreciated. Transportation caused some problems, but parents recognized that there was no ready solution. Parents were unanimous that a Learning Assistance Centre must be located in a regular school and when asked if they would recommend the LAC, several answered that they already had.

Before the implementation of the project, school principals from all schools in the participating units completed an evaluation form to find out their hopes, expectations, and reservations.

The first section contained 20 items which asked what differences did they think the SEECC model of special education service delivery would make to their current special education program. The next 13 items asked about activities which would help principals to prepare their regular teachers for a SEECC type of special education delivery service. A further 12 items asked the principals what they considered to be important features of a SEECC type of special education delivery service for their particular school. The final 17 items recognized that implementing a new program is bound to cause some problems, and principals were invited to check specified problems according to their anticipated seriousness.

After two years experience with the new program, the principals were asked to complete an identical questionnaire, except that on this second occasion they were asked what differences had been made, what problems had arisen, etc., rather than what was anticipated.

All differences between what had been anticipated and what actually occurred were in a positive direction, i.e. things turned out better than had been expected. For example, Table 1 illustrates the difference in the number of principals who rated items as a "serious" or "somewhat serious" problem.

Table 1

Anticipated and experienced problems
in implementing the SEECC Model
(Responses expressed as percentages)

Item description	Anticipated	Experienced in practice
Friction between regular and special educational staff	19	5
Increase in pupil/teacher ratios in regular classes*	56	17
Budget and financial problems*	67	17
Costs too much in local funds*	44	6
Lack of skill in regular teachers in teaching handicapped children*	87	50
Lack of space for special education rooms and equipment*	69	28
Increase in behavior problems, truancy, etc.	27	5
Lack of information about service delivery model available to schools*	63	5
Complexities in pupil attendance counting	20	5

*Statistically significant shifts indicated by asterisk.

In summary, the principals' pre- and post-evaluations confirmed findings obtained in similar circumstances in Texas, that anticipated problems turned out to be rather less than expected, and that positive benefits turned out to be somewhat better than expected.

Conclusion

The three year project confirmed our initial faith that provision of special educational services by teachers, trained along the lines of the SEECC teacher preparation model, and working as a team, can provide a quality education that is compatible with the spirit of "mainstreaming" and realistic in practice. However, the SEECC model was never thought of as being etched in stone and its implementation has been subject to amendment in the light of experience.

One factor that caused us considerable concern was the fate of children whose problems were too great to be tackled effectively by the combined efforts of class teacher and resource teacher in the regular school. Results of the Dickson study quoted earlier, suggested that teachers in regular schools who had not had the SEECC Level 1 training, were reluctant to accept self-contained classes of handicapped students within their school. However, our study on the shift of teacher opinion following SEECC Level 1 preparation, provides grounds for more optimism. Figure 4 illustrates, in flow-chart format, our present conception of the provision of educational services for children with special educational needs, in the light of our educational ideology, thinking and experience.

Figure 4 demonstrates that the regular class teacher is the primary agent for the educational process. However, if she finds herself in a situation where a child is failing to achieve the instructional objectives which are being set, she consults with the resource teacher who is a member of the school staff and,

after further diagnosis by the resource teacher and a decision on the respective teaching responsibilities of class and resource teacher, prescribed remediation for the child is implemented. If, however, this treatment is unsuccessful, then the Learning Assistance Centre staff -- who will have all previous diagnostic information made available to them -- are consulted for more specialized diagnosis. Liaison between the Learning Assistance Centre and the school-based teachers is maintained and, between them, a program implemented for the child. In many cases, the child will still be based in a regular classroom, with prescribed sessions with the resource teacher, but, for those children with severe learning disabilities, emotional maladjustment, moderate sensory defects, the child will be placed in a self-contained classroom (usually with facilities for social integration with other regular students) within a regular school.

However, the development of rational and intellectually satisfying flow-charts and models are insufficient, in themselves, for the successful implementation of an innovative system. The essential condition for successful implementation of a program of special educational services which emphasizes the primary responsibility of the regular schools, is acceptance of the program by administrators, teachers and principals. And the essential ingredients for the program acceptance by these workers are:

(1) development of appropriate professional competencies;

(2) active co-operative involvement in planning the program;

(3) experience of the program in action;

(4) plenty of patience.

PREPARATION FOR TEACHERS OF EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN

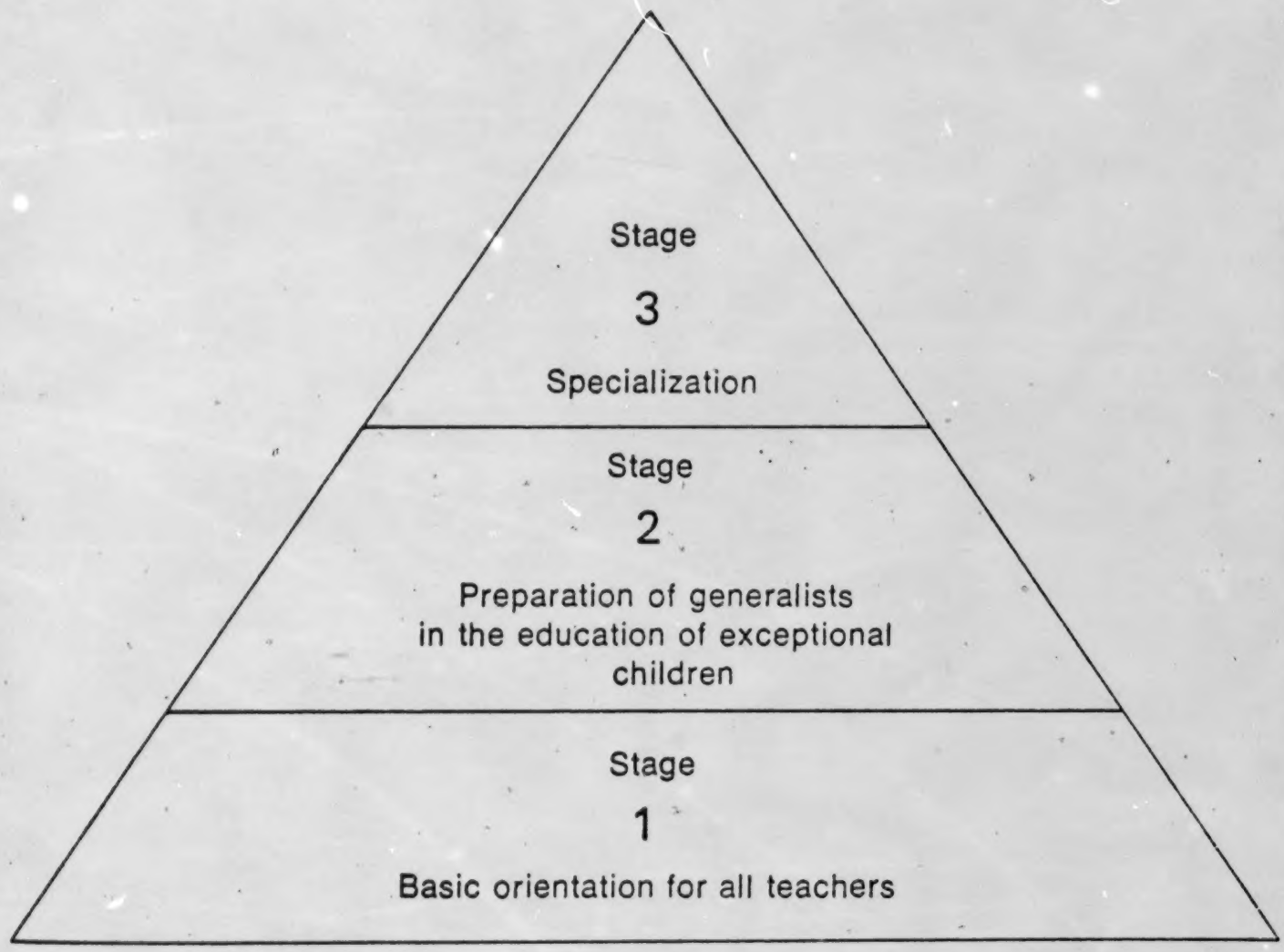
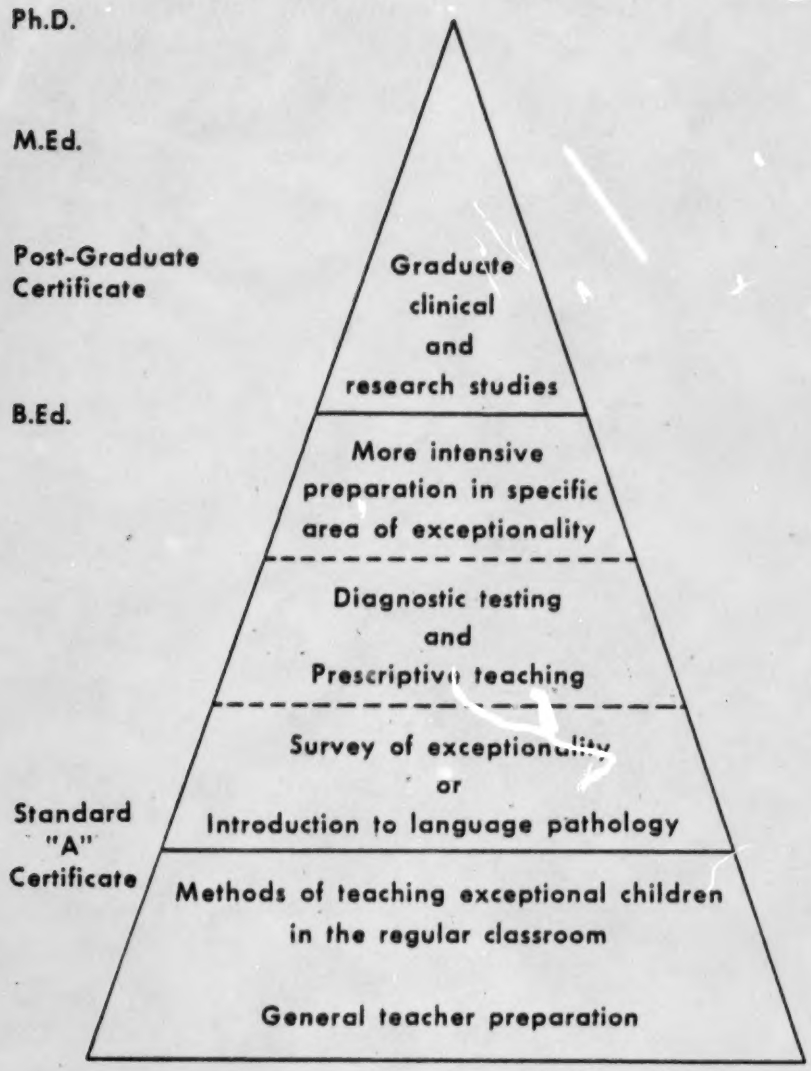


Figure 1


Ph.D.
M.Ed.
Post-Graduate Certificate
B.Ed.
Standard "A" Certificate
Graduate clinical and research studies
More intensive preparation in specific area of exceptionality
Diagnostic testing and Prescriptive teaching
Survey of exceptionality or Introduction to language pathology
Methods of teaching exceptional children in the regular classroom
General teacher preparation
Education of the teacher as a person

University of Saskatchewan program for the preparation of teachers of exceptional children

Figure 2

SERVICE HIERARCHY

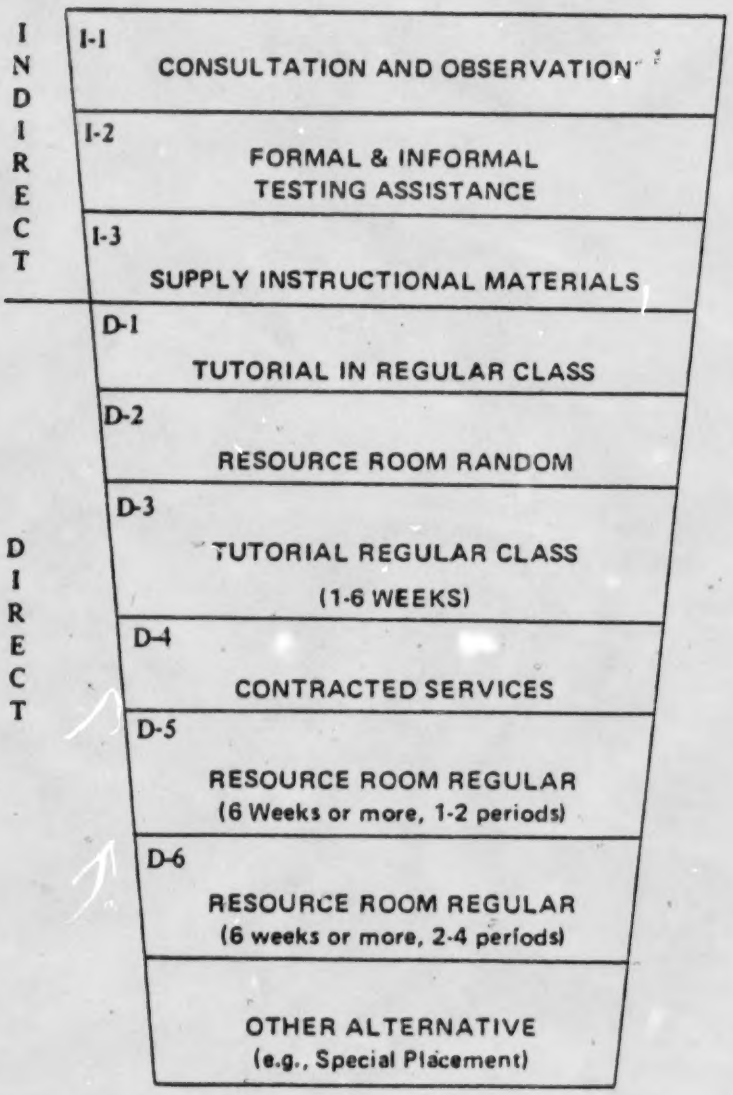


Figure 3

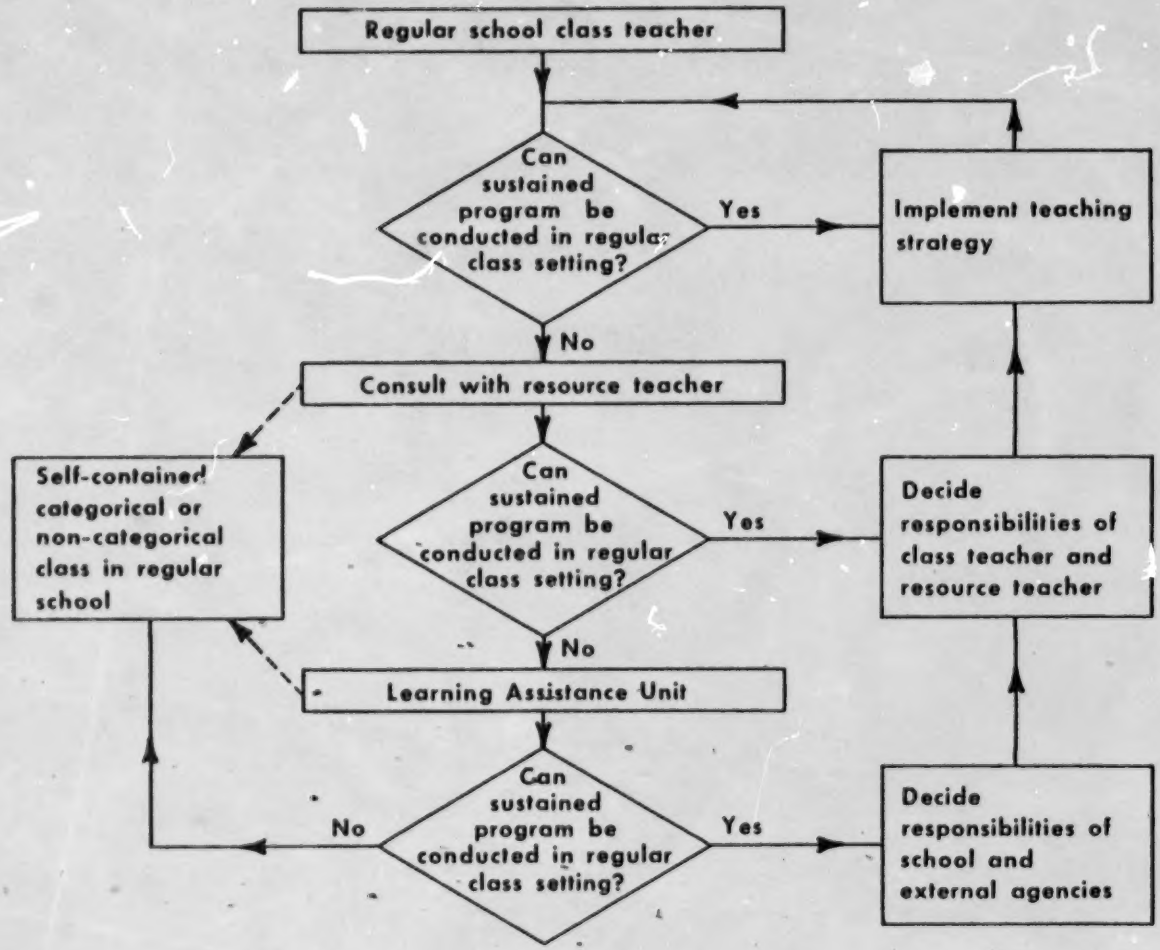

Regular school class teacher
Can sustained program be conducted in regular class setting?
Yes
Implement teaching strategy
No
Consult with resource teacher
Self-contained categorical or non-categorical class in regular school
Can sustained program be conducted in regular class setting?
Yes
Decide responsibilities of class teacher and resource teacher
No
Learning Assistance Unit
Can sustained program be conducted in regular class setting?
No
Yes
Decide responsibilities of school and external agencies

Figure 4

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